

From Language Experience to Classroom Practice

Affirming Linguistic Diversity in Writing Pedagogy

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Teachers of college writing are responsible for helping students develop their abilities to write for varied purposes and audiences, communicate their ideas clearly, and use language effectively in academic settings. In today's classrooms, we encounter students with widely varying literacy backgrounds and skills, students who are linguistically and culturally diverse, most often defined in terms of racial and ethnic (nonwhite) background but also including white students whose home language is a nonmainstream variety of English. Clearly, language differences are more commonplace than they were in the 1970s when "Students' Right to Their Own Language" was first adopted by the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.¹ Indeed, as Peter Elbow (2004: 123) asserts in a special issue of the *Journal of Teaching Writing* devoted to linguistic varieties, "linguistic difference is now unavoidable—especially for most teachers at all levels." Elbow echoes a reality about linguistic diversity that researchers in writing and composition have examined over the last half century, and it is surprising—even disheartening—that our pedagogy has not advanced to keep pace with these changes.² Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner (2005), in their most recent attempt to redirect and revitalize our teaching practices, focus attention on the role of writing program administrators, who are in positions to lead and support efforts toward "unleashing" the literacies of linguistically diverse students. For a profession that has long been committed

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to equal access and social justice, a “sustained reform” of our pedagogy, as Ball and Lardner advocate, is the challenge that teachers must face if our goal is to make learning accessible to all students. Toward this reform, this article not only affirms but demonstrates how language experiences and reflection can create paths that lead to renewed pedagogy and classroom practices that embrace linguistic diversity.

Teachers of writing and composition continue to struggle with the implications of home and community languages as part of classroom pedagogy, and most composition programs do not have explicit language policies or program initiatives that address linguistic diversity in the classroom. While teachers generally agree that linguistic and cultural differences represent a significant change in their work with students, many teachers have not begun to understand the role of linguistic diversity in education (in the teaching of writing, specifically) and the pedagogical implications of multiple varieties of English. On the one hand, most teachers understand the need to accept the language of their students on the grounds that it is the language of nurture, the student’s home language. On the other hand, many of those same teachers who respect language diversity are unwilling to invite the student’s language into the classroom. Often they understand the students’ own language as serving purposes outside the classroom, and they are reluctant to explore or even consider the relationship between home/community varieties and the variety targeted in schools and universities — edited American English.³ Such attitudes toward language and dialects are shaped by what John Trimbur (2006: 584) calls the “relentless monolingualism of American linguistic culture,” a force that silences not only other languages but also dialects of English often mistakenly thought to be “wrong” or “bad English.” As educators, however, we are compelled to raise questions and explore alternative views of language if we believe some students struggle as language learners and writers because of home or community circumstances beyond their control. In today’s linguistic environment, it no longer makes sense to teach writing as though *all* students share a common language or dialect. It is time to give serious thought to how our students’ language varieties figure into instruction in the teaching of writing.

In contrast to teachers in the 1970s who had few materials to reform their pedagogy in light of a changing student landscape, today we have an impressive body of research to help us examine our beliefs about language and to shape our pedagogy. Maria Reyes de la Luz and John J. Halcon (2000) offer unique insiders’ perspectives on the cultural and linguistic strengths of Latino/a students, providing rich ethnographic data to show that nurturing

ethnic and cultural identities is the most effective pedagogy for critical literacy and success in educational settings. Drawing on theories of rhetoric and composition and on her own literacy experiences in a predominantly white educational system, Elaine Richardson (2003) reports on the effects of an African American composition curriculum on the student-participants' writing development, showing how knowledge about the language and literacy of African Americans in the teaching of academic writing can improve the literacy experiences of college students. In her recent book *Hiphop Literacies* (2006), Richardson explores the literacies of popular culture, again with the aim of broadening our understanding of literacies and of valuing the wealth of knowledge our students bring to the classroom. Katherine Kelleher Sohn (2005), in an ethnographic study of Appalachian college women, reiterates the importance of respecting home dialects and ways of knowing and demonstrates the students' uses of speaking and writing to reach a fuller awareness of their identity. Eleanor Kutz, Jackie Cornog, and Denise Paster (2004: 66) describe a writing curriculum in which students explore their own language uses with the "tools of ethnographic research," transferring their analytical skills to a wide range of discourse types and styles—from home and community varieties to academic discourse. Despite the depth and breadth of these studies, Ball and Lardner (2005) remind us that teachers are not easily persuaded to alter their existing pedagogy and change their classroom practices. Geneva Smitherman (qtd. in Ball and Lardner 2005: 147), too, has expressed her own quandaries about such resistance:

People listen to the information about the competence of language, they take it in and then—like cognitive dissonance—they exhibit language behaviors that are totally contrary to the information. There has to be something going on in the deep recesses of the minds of individuals such that the information that they have gained has no access to, or effect on, their behaviors. People have been given the information—the facts—but they still behave in the same old ways.

So how can teachers begin to reflect on issues of linguistic difference that affect growing numbers of our students and do so in a way that transforms pedagogy? How do we bring these issues to other writing teachers in order to influence sound pedagogy at the program level?

As teachers of college writing, we share the common goal of making learning accessible to our students, and we would like to see our writing program move in the direction of a more inclusive pedagogy, providing we can offer other teachers a clear sense of what we can achieve by addressing

language differences in the classroom. Our aim is to collaborate on a way to approach linguistic diversity in the teaching of college writing. In order to change the way teachers think about language and diversity, it is important, certainly, that teachers share knowledge of the language policies adopted by our professional organization and the key research that supports those policies. It is equally important that teachers begin to reflect on their own language experiences, to engage in conversations about language with their colleagues, and to share these experiences with students. Each of us has lived different and relevant language experiences, some of privilege and some of prejudice, and these experiences provide a window through which to view the language and diversity issues that we face in the classroom and in society. In this article, we describe some of our own language experiences, ones we could as well share with our students. We show how these language experiences lead to specific teaching practices that we have used as a way of valuing students' language, moving them forward in their learning about writing and language, and teaching all students the rich meanings embedded in linguistic differences. We conclude with an assessment of our pedagogy and classroom practices, and how we can build on them to improve our teaching as well as shape the contour of our writing program. Our hope is that other teachers and writing program administrators will find our work instructive and purposeful in respect to their own efforts to make learning in the writing classroom a positive and productive experience for all students.

From Language Experience to Classroom Practice

Katherine's Classroom

Kindergarten was not a safe place for me to grow linguistically. For the first day of schooling my Greek immigrant parents, Calliope and Vasilios, dressed me in an all-American outfit reminiscent of Dale Evans—the female western singer and television and radio personality of that era—a tan-colored skirt with buckskin fringe, a matching fringed vest, and a small tin star completed the outfit. My parents bubbled with pride as they walked me to University City K–6 Elementary School in St. Louis, Missouri, to begin half-day kindergarten.

That afternoon when I had returned home, my family and I gathered at the gold-flecked Formica kitchen table. My mother ladled three bowls of chicken avgolemono (egg and lemon) soup: three lemony tendrils of steam rose from the bowls. My father lifted me to his lap as he asked me in his demotic Greek dialect what I had learned during my first day in school: *Ti emathes sto scholio semera?*

I twirled the fringe of my cowgirl skirt and looked at my father's gray eyes as I assuredly said: "You stupid." After a stunned pause, my father, who had always been an exemplary student of human nature, asked me where I had heard that phrase, "You stupid."

I explained to him in Greek that a few of my kindergarten classmates pelted me with these words. No teacher had interceded. My dad patiently explained that my classmates were calling me stupid because I did not speak English yet and they could not understand me. The following day, as my father remembers it, I picked up a sycamore branch in the playground and whacked anyone who called me stupid. Needless to say, I was not easily daunted as a six-year-old minority language user because I understood my linguistic difference as a marker of my superiority, not inferiority. I was on my way to being a bilingual first grader.

To this day, my kindergarten experience flavors my practice of language diversity in the classroom as an assistant professor and teacher of college writing. One lesson I want all my introductory college writing students to learn is that language diversity need not be a reflection of inherent intelligence or writing potential. I tease out attitudinal differences that so many incoming freshmen have about what constitutes *proper* language use. I not only assign essays to help students with their college writing, I inform undergraduates about language diversity. For example, many freshmen confuse a foreign accent with grammatical precision, assuming that if someone sounds different, he or she must be speaking in structurally incorrect English. I explain that speakers with accents might have better syntax and grammar than native English users: they just have an accent. Or, some students might believe that because a fellow student speaks Ebonics he or she cannot code-switch to Standard English dialect, thereby being bidialectal (Wheeler and Swords 2006: 21). I might even ask students to consider Smitherman's (2004: 191) language-dialect debate: Is Ebonics a language in itself and not a dialect of Euro-English? In addition to having my students write academic essays and read popular stories from readers, I ask my students to consider differences between dialects and languages. I share my seminal language experience from kindergarten while making transparent my pedagogy hoping to create a safe(r) writing and speaking environment.

Below I provide a case study in the form of quotations from class writings and interviews with first-year student "Roxanne Dell," a student in W131: Introductory Composition. The home language reflection assignment significantly helped Roxanne understand her literacy experience and then gain more confidence as she applied her writing skills in college. Roxanne

had never considered how her personal language history shaped her language skills and affective attitudes.

Roxanne's parents were from Indianapolis, but her six brothers and sisters were born in different states. Until Roxanne was nine years old, she and her family lived in campgrounds traveling around Indiana, Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, and elsewhere.

Interviewer: Before you took my class, had you reflected on your language experiences?

Student RD: No. I had never thought about it before the question came up in [W131] class . . . It was pretty amazing how it does all connect: my problems, my struggles, my hardships in middle school and high school . . . I see how not being in a stable home . . . I didn't have a place to call my school because we traveled all the time.

Roxanne reports that she feels much more confident and she has learned much from the W131 class. "In my literacy paper, I came to realize that everyone has a literacy experience that had an effect on their life [*sic*]. I never really thought about it but my literacy experience has a big impact on my life. Being raised by parents who loved to travel from state to state . . . , I now realize how all the transience has influenced my learning abilities as a child." Furthermore, Roxanne gained insights into the diversity of language experiences of her classmates: "In the beginning, I thought mine [home language experiences] would be different from everyone else's. I realized that there are plenty of other people that struggle and have literacy experiences that have had a big impact on their lives. Quite a few of them are, I guess you could say, negative . . . I feel I was not the only person struggling." Like Roxanne, when students are asked to reflect on their home language experiences, they begin to recognize and accept their own and others' linguistic histories.

Once students reflect on their own home language experiences and contextualize them among their classmates' experiences, I assist students in better understanding the social, regional, and historical contexts of their language use. By making more transparent the scaffolding of their language use, students gain confidence in discussing their writing and speaking education and "miseducation." Walt Wolfram (1999: 47) presents a rationale for systematic and scientific incorporation of information about linguistic diversity through educational systems and public communication. He argues the following: "(a) beliefs and attitudes about language diversity are intense and entrenched; (b) there is widespread misinformation and 'miseducation' about dialects that pervade the understanding of this topic in American society; and

(c) there is a critical need for informed knowledge about language diversity and its role in education and public life.”

Like Wolfram, I agree that teaching edited American English coupled with dialect awareness would be more effective than teaching edited American English alone, if only to avoid dialect discrimination and raise each student’s awareness of his or her idiosyncratic dialect (49). Wolfram supplies several activities and exercises for working through the myths of dialect; however, in my first-year composition courses, I prefer to contextualize dialect within class readings, student writing, and instructor writing. Because many of my students are from rural Indiana, they use regionalisms affectionately labeled “Hoosierbonics” by a colleague. I ask my students to compare Hoosierbonics to Hebonics, or Jewish vernacular, often used in the television show *Seinfeld* (Bernstein 2006, cited in Wolfram 1999). They quickly apprehend the fluid and even positive connotations to dialects.

In a graduate screenwriting course, I encouraged students to create dialogue that authentically reflects dialects from varied social classes, ethnic backgrounds, and regional locales. Chris Smith (a pseudonym), an aspiring fiction and screenwriter, had this insight after I shared my home language history: “I remember you talking about your family being Greek. . . . It is helpful to know that even [people with] PhDs face various cultural challenges. That was helpful to me because then I could see my characters being on various levels educationally. It helped me to understand my characters . . . that all characters exist as they are, not as we would want them to be. You don’t want to make them something just so you can clarify their English.” Having heard my home language narrative in the screenwriting class, Chris felt much more at ease incorporating his home language, derived from southeastern Kentucky, into his screenplay about his characters who move from the Appalachian hills to a midwestern city.

Chris reflected on the concept of home languages as it related to his screenwriting: “You really realize how different each culture is. It [my home culture] is a very separate, very distinct culture from the culture that exists two hours away in Lexington, Kentucky, and then two more hours away in Louisville, Kentucky, and then drastically different two more hours away in Indianapolis, Indiana.”

Even though the dialects and language diversity of my students might be situated in Hispanic, Asian, or Indian languages or rural and urban vernaculars, students are at least surprised, often intrigued, and occasionally reassured when I share that I, too, have learned many dialects, ethnolects, sociolects, codes, and languages without having to compromise my identity

or authenticity: schoolbook French; schoolbook Spanish; American slang; American Broadcast English; St. Louis, Missouri General American; business dialect; edited American English; academic English; Hoosierbonics; Chicagoese; Valspeak; first-generation English; ESL, and demotic Greek, to name a few.

I direct multilingual language users or those who are uncomfortable with multilingualism in the American classroom to the 2000 United States census (U.S. Census Bureau 2003) that found almost 60 million people, or about 20 percent of the American population, speak and write in more than one language—and the trend toward multilingualism is expected to continue to grow. In my courses, I try to dismantle the inveterate notion among most of my freshman writers that they just need to learn the one proper way to speak and write *perfect* English.

Perhaps if my kindergarten teacher had been encouraged to deal with language diversity in her elementary education teaching program, she could have used my kindergarten mini-trauma as an introduction to a lesson on language and tolerance. In any case, I share these moments with my students today as part of my pedagogical scaffold (Schön 1983 and 1987)—and no one needs to use a stick to be accepted.

Kim's Classroom

I developed my interest in English language varieties after my course work in sociolinguistics in graduate school, where I was first introduced to the formal study of language, its structure, and its uses. Having struggled with school language through most of my education, I was intrigued by the distinction between *prescriptive* and *descriptive* grammars, or how we *ought* to use language versus how we *actually* use it. This distinction presented a different view of language than the one I had intuited from my school experiences. I had not thought about kinds of grammar before then, though I was well aware of my own difficulties with grammar in school. In elementary and secondary school, for example, I was frequently assigned grammar exercises that were unhelpful and frustrating, for me as well as my parents. Through college and even into graduate school, features of my oral dialect and idiolect (e.g., using the past tense of “go” as a past participle, as in *I'd went*) appeared in my writing and speaking in situations where a more formal variety was expected. Grammar was not something I began to grasp until I got into graduate school, where the structure of the language finally began to make sense to me. It was my course work in sociolinguistics that answered many of the questions I had about my language experiences in school.

I was fortunate to have working-class parents who valued education and who offered assistance when I needed it. My mother was usually the one to help with the details of homework assignments. My father, on the other hand, was helpful in the ways he touted education. He worked as a letter carrier for the postal service, and his interactions with people on his route often became the topics of conversations at the dinner table, lessons from the world outside. His love of reading was an early influence on my emerging literacy: books and the idea of writing things down, in a quiet work space I could call my own, appealed to me. However, I was not a particularly good reader or writer. I recall the times in sixth grade when I would meet in the library after school and read with my teacher because she had recognized a weakness in my reading ability. I was a slow reader. When I wrote papers, it was a painstaking task to get words into sentences that would carry my meaning. Writing with fluidity was as unnatural to me as reading from right to left, and I almost always got my papers returned with excessive marking of sentence errors. It was always about grammar and sentence style; rarely were comments directed to the content and meaning of my compositions. I was fortunate to have had a professor in college and two in graduate school who took an interest in my development as a writer. I probably would not be a teacher today if it were not for my persistence and their dedication. My college professor was the first teacher I can remember talking to me about something I had written — a paper about the bastard son Edmund in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. I learned to write because these teachers were interested in helping me to develop my ideas and to communicate them — by questioning, probing, insisting on clarity, teasing out connections and parallels, and talking about the craft of writing.

Interestingly, learning to write in a second language was as problematic as learning to write in my first language. I grew up in an English-French community just seventy miles south of Montreal, and I was required to take French in elementary school. I can remember the trepidation I experienced at the thought of learning in another language, but I was consoled by the fact that my mother spoke French fluently, having been raised in a bilingual home and having attended the same school when half the school day was taught in French. Though she never attempted to teach her children French, she spoke French with her three sisters, with the neighbors, and with people she would run into at the market. It was a language she used almost as much as she did English. Nevertheless, when I had to complete homework assignments in French and sought my mother's help, either with grammar or compositions, I got the same response from my teacher as I did when I wrote in English, the

same red marking of my papers. My French teacher, in fact, told me not to ask for my mother's help. "She speaks a different dialect, Canadian French," the teacher would say, an admonition that made little sense to me. I understood that what I was learning in French was different — a *prestige variety*, the teacher said — but it didn't mean anything to me at the time because I didn't know the differences or why they would matter to anyone. When I wrote in French or in English, I was doing my best to communicate, to put sentences together in a way that conveyed my meaning; my teachers responded as though grammar and style dictated meaning, and because I was weak in these areas, I was, in effect, a meaning-less writer.

We are supposed to learn to write in school — to develop our abilities to compose in writing while also learning the intricacies of form and style. But when many students step into the classroom even today, they are taught the style and conventions of edited American English, often without substantive instruction in composition, in writing to convey and sustain meaning. Romy Clark and Roz Ivanić (1997), for example, suggest that teachers' insistence on correctness, while understandable in some kinds of writing, is often misplaced and damaging, affecting not only students who struggle with mechanical aspects of writing but also teachers who perpetuate language myths that they believe will ensure their students' success in society. These technical aspects of writing, Clark and Ivanić argue, are often generalized and used as criteria of quality, leading to judgments of intelligence and moral worth. Rather than focusing attention immediately on the conventions of academic writing, I want my students to understand grammar as "sociolinguistic practice" (Wolff 2005), for writing serves many functions and roles, including those of context, purpose, and social identities, all of which affect the choices we make as writers. This view of grammar suggests that students first *compose* their writing and attend to larger features of texts (e.g., focus, development, purpose, context) in their own language. Learning the conventions of academic writing is important and necessary, but students should also learn the importance of their own language or get to experience what they already know and can do with language. Donald Wolff (2005: 97–98), writing about grammar and conventions in *The Outcomes Book*, recalls a student he taught in a university course "designed for the weakest dialect writers," and this student achieved A work by the end of the term. However, when he congratulated her on her achievement, she said that she appreciated the grade but wanted "to avoid writing in the future." Although Wolff initially felt he had succeeded by helping the student achieve the university's standards, he writes, "I felt that I had failed, for my emphasis on academic prose had killed

whatever joy she might have had in writing by making it grunt work. I take this as an emblem for a very real danger in stressing academic writing and its concomitant correctness.” Enabling students to learn academic writing in the context of their own language was the intended outcome of the “Students’ Right” policy. However, though it was clearly an important influence on the writing-as-process movement (Bruch and Marback 2005), the students’ own language was never fully explored and used as a means of learning a new language variety. As educators, if we can agree that the *composing* features of writing should take precedence over grammar in writing instruction, then our pedagogy should be directed at how we can best enable students to trust their own language when they write.

Because of my own language experiences, I set out to discover as much as I can about the students’ home/community language, and I naturally tend to identify more with unconfident or struggling writers than I do with reasonably confident ones. It’s as though I know their fears and frustrations about writing even before they can articulate them. But I continually remind myself that the instruction and experiences I offer college students must be suited to their needs as writers, whatever those needs might be, and not just to the needs of the struggling writer. I teach in a mixed classroom of mainstream and nonmainstream students, some older, nontraditional students, but mostly white college-age students with increasing numbers of African American, Asian American, and Latino/a students. The challenge in mixed classrooms is teaching in a way that moves everyone forward in their development as writers, and in a class about writing and learning to write, the topic of language is rich in possibilities for raising awareness of difference and creating optimal environments for learning.

Despite the differences among students in my writing classes, students seem to share attitudes toward language, often reflecting misconceptions and untruths, language myths derived largely from their school experiences. For example, they express the belief that “standard” English is necessary and important in society and that any other variety of English is wrong, incorrect, lazy, or bad. They know from their own experiences that their language is functional and purposeful in their worlds outside the classroom, but they don’t see its relevance to writing and to the acquisition of “standard” English. They see their own language as substandard and therefore irrelevant to school writing. Nancy Mack (2006: 56–57) reports that marginalized students “perceive themselves as lacking verbal aptitude” and “fear that their language habits are a potential target for humiliation at the university.” Rosina Lippi-Green (1997) writes about how commonly held myths about language lead to

language subordination. My interactions with students in class confirm that many have not had opportunities to talk openly about their language varieties in their study and practice of the English targeted in school. They lack fundamental teaching about language and its uses, and their language attitudes are often barriers to their learning.

For these reasons, I aim to give my students a broader conception of language than what they would typically learn in a traditional classroom. I want them to experience the language varieties within the class itself and to experience their own language as a meaning-making vehicle.⁴ In self-sponsored writing activities, they express themselves in their own language to communicate meaning, in whatever form or style they choose. In the following excerpt, for example, Brett writes about his home language, his personal and community identity, and the disconnection he felt with “proper” English in school:

I fight Authority and Authority always Wins! I remember first coming into this institution knowing that I will have to write papers, talk in front of people, and the worst of all read! Why? To me, learning to speak correctly was never presented to me as something as a necessity. Especially in the environment I grew up in. My friends and I grew up in working-class neighborhoods, and we spoke how we felt and were never corrected. In other words, a standard English was never spoken at home nor encouraged. When I graduated high school I had only passed junior general English. I flunked the English courses that were designed to prepare students for college level academics. . . . Growing up, I just couldn't bring myself to speak that way nor did I really know how. I felt that speaking proper really wasn't who I was. I was roughneck, a thug, a kid who'd go fishing, get drunk, smoke some weed, and most of all hang out at “Smoky's Corner.” . . . My mom would refer to this place when she was scolding me for my rebellious behavior. “Your Dad and 'em would act that way when they were over at Smoky's Corner,” she would harp. I didn't care! I loved it. I loved it all — this hickish - white trash persona. I call it the John Mellencamp syndrome. How could I be that way if I spoke proper? I fought authority, remember? Unfortunately to my dismay, I forgot about the end of the chorus — authority always wins. I accept my dialect, but I also accept the fact that I need to know the “standard.”

I liked the fact that Brett was comfortable writing about his dialect and identity as a young man, bringing his own background and experiences into juxtaposition with the culture of the university. He demonstrates a good deal about his writing abilities in this piece — the way he frames the piece with references to authority, his use of questions to engage readers, the concrete

details characterizing his identity, and the language he captures when he quotes his mother.

I insist that what my students produce must be meaningful, substantive, and coherent, and if the intended readers are outside my circle of experience, I ask questions of the text and the writer to be sure their writing fulfills its promise. Rather than insisting on “proper” form and style, on the conventions of writing we value in formal settings, I tell them it’s more important that they hear the words on the page as they’re read. Many students are preoccupied and stifled by form. I like to show them a passage from Richard Rodriguez’s autobiography *Hunger for Memory* (1983: 1): “Once upon a time, I was a ‘socially disadvantaged’ child. An enchantedly happy child. Mine was a childhood of intense family closeness. And extreme public alienation. Thirty years later, I write this book as a middle-class American man. Assimilated.” This kind of writing would not pass muster in most schools today, though it clearly possesses a powerful and richly evocative form and its meaning is intensely clear. This is one kind of writing I want my students to experience as both readers and writers. I want them to produce pieces of writing that others can read and react to, and allowing them to eavesdrop in reader response groups provides the motivation and incentive for them to revise and continue writing, especially when the writer begins to comprehend that his or her words mean something to readers.

For an assignment asking students to describe a culture they inhabit that may not be known or familiar to others, Andy, an African American student, began her paper this way: “There’s this place I know where only cool cats go, artists, musicians, poets you know. A funky junky place where bop blows cool on smoke-stained eyes ’round ten round tables and forty square chairs in the long, narrow space, with fifty orange candles to give a glow to the place.” She titled the paper “Funky Junky Smokin’ Bar,” which happened to be the place she liked to go when she needed to work on her art sketches. While most students used an expository frame to describe their culture, writing from the perspective of an observer rather than a participant, Andy chose a participant role, first describing her surroundings: “Juke box playing some crazy Miles shit. Swivel right. Check the stage; no music till nine. Look down at the bar top, scribbles and scratches, quotations, orations in black sharpie pen. Look up at the beat young mystery behind the bar; she’s somebody’s prose. Eyes follow mystic Yowza! butt to the mixing station to draw me a long pour wicked libation.” Readers soon discover that she too is an artist in this bar, with her sketchpad in hand, waiting for the moment when her creative thoughts begin to flow. As she describes the surroundings, she conveys her

inability to put lines on the empty page in front of her out of fear and a fast-approaching deadline. Finally, something happens — “the place is getting louder. Up on stage piano’s undressed . . . Show time” — and it triggers an onslaught of ideas:

Becoming part of the beat, mind mirrors sound, creation____alive! Rainbows into moving colors, voice moving in my head____*Do this, do that, shape this, curve that . . .* I feel I see I fly free! White page gone, colors, lines . . . Now this funky junky place got people all out in space. Claude caressing the ivory keys, melodic abstract inspirations, Frank’s horn blows and blasts, bellows and bleats his pain. Glasses clickin’, people smokin’ and drinkin’. A sax man moanin’ “Can’t find a gig blues,” sculptor blowin’ hard about paying his dues, while this dude’s in his notebook riff’n’ with his pen, and another in my sketch pad scratchin’ and scribblin’ again and again, and home is a funky junky smokin’ bar with ten round tables and forty square chairs and fifty orange candles and bop__blowin’__cool.

When I met with this student in conference, I could have coached her to adopt a more academic style and stance, but I chose instead to capitalize on what she was attempting to achieve in the paper. There is a clever, inventive use of language in the paper, with its rhythms, rhymes, and alliterations, which I wanted to validate as effective and communicative. She intentionally used a poetic style because it seemed to better represent the aura she was attempting to capture in her description. I encouraged her to expand on her description of the culture, capturing sensory details, and to accentuate the narrative embedded in the description since she had assumed a participant role. She envisioned her college peers as her audience and wanted to display her sketches as illustrations in her text, giving the narrative another dimension.

This kind of instruction in a writing classroom can release the creative energies of the writer, and it serves to model the way language works. Moreover, with these written pieces, as well as published pieces like the Rodriguez excerpt, teachers can find ways of talking about language to debunk the myths that freeze writers. With the diversity we are seeing in our classrooms, we must create space and opportunities for students to experiment with their natural, home language, making meaning and communicating powerfully, while also understanding the reality of a complex world that values “standards” in the language of wider communication. Certainly in every classroom the language of edited American English is a primary goal of writing instruction, but when taught in the context of a language-rich curriculum, it’s easier for students to see how they can begin to incorporate their own realities, their own language, into the dominant discourse of schools and society.

Steve's Classroom

My first teaching job was in a context of language oppression. I was assigned to teach English in a church-sponsored secondary school in Hong Kong, in 1977, as a young MA graduate. I had signed up for the Southern Baptist equivalent of the Peace Corps. I learned that my assigned school was one of the relatively few schools in Hong Kong to use Chinese as the medium of instruction. Most Chinese students in Hong Kong, a British colony, studied all their subjects (except for Chinese language and literature) in English. The most prestigious university, Hong Kong University, used English as well. My mentor at the secondary school, a veteran missionary teacher, felt strongly that Chinese students should study in their own language. Consistent with her beliefs, she had become fluent in Chinese herself, attended a Chinese Baptist church, and adapted to Hong Kong Chinese culture.

For my students at that secondary school, English was a ticket to success in business and government, or sometimes an essential tool if they ended up emigrating to the United States, Canada, or England. But they struggled with English, and they struggled to overcome the barriers of an English-based, exam-oriented educational system. Few of them were admitted to an institution of higher learning in Hong Kong. Many of them were from lower-income, working-class families. Language was implicated in matters of socioeconomic class, social mobility, educational and occupational success, prestige, and status.

What I learned in Hong Kong stayed with me. Teaching basic and first-year English at a community college in a midwestern city, teaching basic English at a major state university, and for the past sixteen years teaching a variety of writing courses at an urban commuter campus in Indianapolis, I have seen how education is held out to students as a way out of dead-end jobs, as a ticket to success in U.S. society, as a path to self-fulfillment. A key ability in this journey is mastery of edited American English. I have served as the gatekeeper of that English, as an elder who initiates others into this privileged community, as a representative of mainstream language. To some students, no doubt, I have been like a missionary from another culture—a dominant, successful, powerful culture that, no matter how beneficent the intentions of its purveyors, remains a sometimes oppressive culture.

I am not parroting politically correct jargon or spouting empty rhetoric. I am not trying to compensate for my sense of guilt at my part in this cultural and social drama, nor do I wish to lay a guilt trip on other English teachers. English language and writing instruction can be a source of liberation, too, for both students and teachers. But we have to see it for what it is,

in all its manifestations. We have to see the “violence of literacy” (Stuckey 1990) as one aspect of the power of literacy in order to approach our task free of illusions, and we must be ready to inquire into our students’ language backgrounds and contexts.

Because of those early teaching experiences and my learning about language and writing in graduate school, I often use a literacy or education narrative, at times a literacy or language autobiography, as an early assignment in a course. Both my students and I need to explore what language has meant for them in the past before we discover what it might mean for them in the future. English is a tool they can use, but they must recognize how it has been used to shape them. To be honest, they and I have not fully understood this reality. Too often, we simply plow ahead, soldiers in a parade-ground exercise or at times a march into battle, not questioning our orders or the justification for the war we are engaged in. A document such as “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” when read afresh, strikes me as the Emancipation Proclamation might have struck some soldiers and citizens during the U.S. Civil War.

Students’ literacy narratives often lead them to new awareness about the possibilities of writing; they are liberated from internalized constraints and limiting self-perceptions. Deborah, a returning adult student, discovered herself as a writer, as she notes in this reflective statement accompanying her writer’s collage:

The theme or point of this collage is my discovery that writing is not something just for other people. It made its own way forward as I read the parts of the different writings from the first workshop. I could see my stubbornness to think this might not be for me, then I could see the exploration of the possibilities, and finally I came to the realization that everyone has something to say as a writer just as everyone has something to say as a person. This is probably very simple to most people and yet I was not able to see it until now.

Other students, like Linda, realize that they flourish as writers when given certain freedoms:

I intensely despise writing research papers that are supposed to fit a formal format of strict dialogue. Staying within the correct outline of the paper format is dull. I find those papers to be stark and dry without any originality. . . . In my Appreciation to Literature class I was able to write essays in my own personal style. I absolutely loved it and never wanted to stop writing; I would stay up all night and morning typing those papers.

Inviting students to bring other varieties of language into the classroom and into their writing is not easy, especially in first-year composition or even advanced writing courses, which often focus on professional, academic, journalistic, business, or technical writing. Those contexts constrain language use and have their own conventions for style, organization, and editing. Such writing tends to be done in mainstream settings where edited American English is the norm.

One way to invite students to use their home languages and other varieties of language is through multigenre writing. Since learning about multigenre papers from Tom Romano at a conference of writing teachers in Indianapolis (see Romano 2000), I have used this approach in various courses, including advanced expository writing (an upper-level course required of secondary English education majors and chosen as an elective by English majors and other students), the senior capstone seminar for English majors, and first-semester composition. Whatever their topics—and they have included biographies and memoirs of celebrities, authors, and relatives; explorations of issues in education, politics, and culture; quilting, state parks, house music, mentoring programs, and dance programs in public schools—students explore them in a collage of different genres, including dialogue, e-mail, letters, brochures, personal essays, news articles, feature articles, interviews, plays, anecdotes, short stories, poems, resumes, photo captions, speeches, recipes, instructions, profiles, and song lyrics. Some of these genres allow and in fact invite familiar, colloquial, and creative uses of language. Writers must think about their audience and purpose, both for the paper or project overall and for individual sections within it. An instant message conversation between two young people must reflect the language appropriate to such a genre and scenario, but must also work within the larger framework of the multigenre project to reach its intended audience, which might be a broader readership that needs to understand youth culture but isn't fully privy to its conventions. Thus, a student can use one or more of her languages (or dialects or idiolects, whichever term you prefer) in a deliberate manner, enjoying the freedom and power that comes from purposeful communication. Other students, the instructor, and often readers outside the university (such as family members and friends) can enjoy the wide repertoire of language employed in a way they might not appreciate if the student wrote a more “monolingual” essay, whether that be in edited American English or a nonstandard variety of English.

In future courses, I will more thoroughly integrate various elements of this language-sensitive approach to writing instruction. I would like to have

students explore their own language and literacy histories and present fluencies; read, think, and write about issues that arise from language variety, such as bilingual education, multilingual societies, intercultural communication, and the impact of language on culture and thought; and experiment with language and style in multigenre papers.

In first-year composition last year, I began such an approach by having students read Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* and June Jordan's essays about language (see Jordan 2002) and having them do a writer's collage (a form of literacy narrative taken from Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff's text, *Being a Writer* [2002]) and a multigenre collage. Students enjoyed writing in the collage and multigenre formats, and some did interesting things with style, but their language variety was mostly in terms of register, not dialect. Reading Rodriguez and Jordan helped students think about language and education in new ways, though I would say most students who chose to write about these issues argued against any radical changes in how language was used in U.S. schools. Students did empathize with Rodriguez's difficulties learning English in school while speaking Spanish at home, and for some students, their emotional response to his narrative outweighed any rational response to his own complex argument against bilingual education. Hannah wrote, "It is sad when English became the primary language they spoke in the home. I know that it is good to practice the language that you are striving to become better at, but also you do not want to lose your values from home, your native tongue." Even students who wrote papers arguing against bilingual education mostly drew on Rodriguez's story rather than his arguments for supporting evidence. For example, one student cited Rodriguez's family's desire for their children to assimilate: "His parents wanted Richard and their other children to speak English and to succeed in school so badly they were willing to sacrifice their way of life, their 'family language' as Rodriguez refers to it."

Similarly with Jordan's arguments about Black English: students resisted her logical points but were moved by the story of Willie Jordan (June Jordan's student, no relation) and his brother's killing by the police. However, some students found Jordan's essay convincing, such as Randi: "I also thought it was really neat to see them write out their spoken language. It made me want to try and write it out. I think it is a good idea for these students to be trying that, I do not see anything wrong with them taking hold of their language and running with it. That is who they are and no one should change it." Moreover, students learn something about language choices available to writers from Rodriguez and Jordan. As one student wrote, "Reading *Hunger of Memory* and *Some of Us Did Not Die* gave me the opportunity to

analyze the choices of other writers. Sometimes Richard Rodriguez wrote in a way that I didn't think was grammatically correct. I learned about artistic license and that a person doesn't have to follow the rules of grammar as long as he knows why he's doing it."

Beyond my own classroom, I would like to work with others in our university writing program to develop language policies and teaching strategies that effectively implement the principled policies we adopt. As the director of a National Writing Project site, working with teachers of kindergarten to college students, I would like to help them explore these issues in their own contexts, deepening their understanding of how language works and strengthening their commitment to an informed, democratic, just educational practice.

In some ways I am not so far removed from my teaching experience in Hong Kong. In the U.S. educational system today, standardized examinations are employed by a top-down system to impose control on teachers and students alike. The ruling class imposes its will, often in a heavy-handed manner (witness English-only statutes, immigrant-bashing, and the conflict between poor urban youth and their more privileged teachers and administrators). Yet just as the reigning system in Hong Kong was threatened by the looming handover to the People's Republic of China in 1997, so the system in the United States today is threatened by demographic and political changes. As writing teachers, we are almost inevitably seen as missionaries from another, powerful culture by many of our students and their families, especially when we teach in diverse urban and rural settings (though no university is cut off from these social changes). How will we respond? We could help build linguistic fences around our schools. We could resign our missionary posts, but we would lose our ability to influence our institutions. Or we could respond like my mentor teacher in Hong Kong, respecting students' right to their own *languages* and the many languages available to them, offering them linguistic choices, and even learning some of their languages.

Recommendations for Pedagogy and Practice

A number of important themes emerge in our descriptions of language experiences and classroom practices. As we think about how we can assist other teachers to reflect on their own writing pedagogy, we offer these themes as guides to other teachers' inquiries into the dynamics of linguistically diverse classrooms.

Our objective has been to show that reflecting on our language experiences is not only a way to design classroom practices but also a way to under-

stand the struggles for language rights among those with the least power in our society and, equally important, to see our way through our profession's language policies to the pedagogical reforms that will change students' lives. This process of writing and reflecting on language experiences, as well as interacting with each other, is the seedbed for reenvisioning our pedagogy and how we use class time, what we want our students to experience, and what we value as educators. In this article, we recount different language experiences and their impact on the classroom practices we enact with our students. Katherine's early childhood experience shapes the classroom activities that engage her students and enables her to connect with language policies like that articulated in *Students' Right* (1974), to find meaning in its message, and to educate her students about language choices. Kim's personal struggles with written language as a white, working-class student help him to connect with students from diverse backgrounds whose discourses and practices differ from those of the academy. The language-rich environment of the classroom is the ideal setting for learning about linguistic identities and for introducing the discourse of academic writing. Steve describes a language experience while teaching in another country and his interactions with another teacher whose sensitivity to language changed Steve's own perceptions. His experience teaching in Hong Kong provides a critical language perspective that informs his reading and understanding of our profession's language policies. As we will point out later in this discussion, each teacher's language experiences create the pathways to understanding linguistic diversity and the pedagogy to communicate that understanding to our students.

Recognition and acceptance of linguistic differences in the classroom is fundamental to our understanding of social context. The linguistic experiences of students vary significantly, even in classrooms that are predominately white and middle-class. At our institution, most students are native speakers of English, but increasing numbers are bilingual and bidialectal learners. The language experiences we describe in this article illuminate the linguistic diversity that exists in every classroom, whether it be related to ethnicity, gender, class, or location. Indeed, the social context of the classroom — the linguistic identities of our students and the space in which these various identities can express themselves and flourish — is key to understanding who our students are and how we can help them develop their abilities. Zemelman and Daniels (1988: 51) write about the social context of the classroom as “our most powerful available tool in literacy development.” Our attention to the differences in our students' literacy backgrounds is critically important to ensuring their success as learners. We believe that “safety” and “trust” are

important elements of successful writing classrooms — that students need to feel safe if they are going to write and show growth in their writing. This is especially true for students who have struggled because of their language differences. Eileen Kennedy (2003), for example, invited her Creole-speaking students to write in Creole, but at first she wasn't successful because her students had never done it before, had never been asked to, and some didn't know how (there were no orthographic standards). However, when she began to relate her own experiences with language prejudice and to gain their trust, they began to experiment with their language and tell their stories. Kennedy reports that enabling her students to write in their home language was instrumental in helping them acquire the conventions of edited American English. Both Katherine and Kim have experienced classrooms where their home language was not valued, and all three of us have found some of our students opening up as writers when they discerned the classroom environment as safe and accepting of all language varieties.

Besides recognizing and accepting these differences, it is also important to explore their value in learning and teaching. Certainly one way to value our students' backgrounds and experiences is through their critical engagement with course readings that reflect their worlds, as Valerie Felita Kinloch (2005) so aptly demonstrates. For students learning to write, a pedagogy that validates their home and community language varieties taps into their personal resources for learning and enables them to connect with the curriculum. These are the varieties that are often barred from the classroom, that represent our students' own textual worlds, and that can form the basis for instruction in academic writing. L. S. Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development" supports the view that students who use nonmainstream varieties are more likely to succeed in learning more formal varieties if they can build on what they already know and do as language users. Likewise, students who are raised in homes and communities where they hear mainstream English (or a variety closer to the language of schools) can enrich their learning experience — their ability to write effectively — by understanding how language defines and expresses different individual and cultural realities. As we have attempted to show, our own language experiences can inform our teaching and help us to appreciate how a changing classroom climate invites new conceptions of what literacy means in twenty-first-century America.

Self-sponsored writing, literacy histories/autobiographies, multigenre writing, and imaginative writing are effective ways to teach composing skills while valuing students' own language and experiences. Although an important goal of first-year composition is to help students do effective academic

writing in university courses, the best *academic* writing is done by those who develop fluency as writers in many genres and for a variety of purposes and audiences. We believe students will be more successful as writers when they examine their attitudes toward writing and language and when they explore the possibilities of writing, even in a playful manner. All three of us have students do some kind of literacy autobiography or literacy narrative as a way of taking stock, of reflecting on the sources of their writing attitudes and abilities. Inviting students to include their language experiences in such literacy histories can lead to important insights. Reading literacy and language narratives (including those of the instructor) allows students to see that their experiences are not unique; they can be encouraged by comparing their experiences to those of published writers, and they can become more open to the language varieties of their classmates.

Because we also believe in inviting students to bring their home and outside languages into their writing, we offer writing assignments that might not seem strictly academic. Self-sponsored writing has been touted by writing teachers for many years, but it is especially important in a linguistically diverse classroom. The students in Kim's classroom write on subjects of their own choosing, on subjects they know about, and sometimes in language varieties particular to those subjects and settings.

Multigenre assignments create space for students' creativity and ingenuity while also doing intellectual work in the academy. Even if other instructors never assign such multigenre papers, students in a writing class often become engaged by research questions and the opportunity to communicate their learning in a variety of genres. Steve hopes his students will carry this excitement about intellectual inquiry and interesting communication into other classrooms or professional settings. He also wants to see if students can be invited to use more varieties of language in multigenre papers.

Imaginative writing assignments, such as the screenwriting Katherine writes about above, allow student writers to explore authentic language as they create characters and their dialogue. Although creative writing classrooms might be considered exempt from the rules that govern writing and language use in other classrooms, in fact even creative writing teachers must consider their students' language backgrounds and help students understand what readers will accept and when they can expand the possibilities of written language, challenging their readers. And within first-year writing courses, imaginative writing (perhaps as part of multigenre papers) may have a valuable role to play. Within an imaginative text, a student can explore varieties of language and even juxtapose those varieties.

Language education is important to both mainstream and nonmainstream students. If all students are going to develop healthy and informed attitudes toward language differences, we need to talk about language differences and what they signify. As students and teachers alike reflect on their language experiences related to gender, class, region, ethnicity, as well as color, they learn to be better readers and communicators. They heighten their awareness of the plethora of dialects. Teaching awareness and respect for different dialects, speech communities, home languages, L1s and L2s and so on, does not obviate the need to teach edited American English; rather, the teaching of language diversity enhances students' and teachers' rhetorical toolbox and makes for more effective communication to a wider variety of audiences.

Heightening language awareness is not just for students. Many K–16 teachers would benefit from teacher training and self-reflection about language. Smitherman (2003: 4) calls for the inclusion of “a course on language awareness and American dialects” in the training of English teachers at all levels. Similarly, Kim Brian Lovejoy (2003: 95) states, “To meet the challenge of diversity, English teachers must begin to fill the gaps in knowledge created by teacher preparation programs that emphasize literary study with little, if any, attention to the teaching of writing in diverse cultures.” Teacher education programs, literature and composition graduate programs, and professional development for veteran teachers can improve learning through instruction in language diversity. Our pedagogy should be aware of the social conditions and classroom demographics surrounding us.

We need to explore the pedagogical implications of our profession's language policies and to sustain our progress toward pedagogical reform. As Scott Wible (2006) points out in his historical article on the Language Curriculum Research Group (LCRG) of the late 1960s and early 1970s, teachers have developed classroom strategies for honoring and building on students' multiple languages and literacies. In the case of the LCRG, their work came into conflict with a resurgence of back-to-basics reform and political and social conservatism. Recently, a number of books, articles, and conference presentations have begun exploring classroom implementation of the “Students' Right” policy. Once again, such promising work could remain marginalized or suppressed by the latest version of the “back to the basics” educational movement. In a climate that emphasizes standardized testing under the guise of advocating educational success for all students, policies and practices that highlight language diversity may meet with a chilly welcome. Another problem is teacher ignorance and apathy. Even with a required linguistics course or two, or multicultural emphases in methods courses, how many teachers

have enough knowledge about language diversity, and enough confidence, to create innovative classrooms that use language diversity to promote acquisition of multiple discourses and critical thinking about those discourses? Policies alone will not reach many of these teachers, or will not touch them deeply enough to create lasting change.

We think many teachers would find effective the process we narrate in our language and teaching stories above: reflection on their own language experiences, followed by conversations with colleagues, and then moving into their classrooms with this heightened awareness. Such “consciousness raising” may provide more fertile ground for implementing particular teaching strategies offered by monographs and articles and developed by teachers themselves in their own local contexts. The process of remembering, reflecting, reading, and applying will be recursive, entered into at different points, and reentered as needed. The authors of this article try to help our students engage in similar reflection and conversation to affect their writing and language practice. We also want to invite teachers in our programs and departments to reflect on their experiences and have such conversations. We may find it easier to integrate policies and practices when we make personal connections to our own and others’ language experiences.

Making our profession’s language policies and the underlying theories more personal and local must be done with a firm grounding in linguistic and rhetorical knowledge, and with attention paid to political, social, and economic factors. As Wible (2006: 467) cautions, “By focusing solely on the need for curricular reform, the LCRG allowed back-to-basics supporters to sidestep discussions about the politics and economics of education.” Teachers should be encouraged to make new knowledge through teacher research projects. Changing professional practices is difficult enough; changing professional assumptions, attitudes, and goals seems quixotic. Renee Blake and Cecelia Cutler (2003), in a study of five secondary schools in New York City and their teachers’ attitudes toward linguistic differences, found that schools’ philosophies that promoted linguistic diversity influenced teachers’ disposition and sensitivity toward students whose language varieties differed from the mainstream. This institutional infrastructure is a necessary component of teacher reform. Like all revolutionary change, however, changing the way we view language diversity in the classroom will require reaching individual teachers one by one, in small groups. As the authors of the “Students’ Right” policy state, “We affirm strongly that teachers must have the *experiences* and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of

students to their own language” (1974: [inside front cover] ; emphasis added) If teachers can put themselves into the “Students’ Right” statement, they are more likely to bring the statement into their classrooms by engaging students in diverse uses of language and thus enabling them to express their meanings in multiple ways. This broader conception of language and literacy is premised on teachers’ sensitivity to differences in their classrooms that serve the purposes of education for all students.

Notes

1. “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” was passed by the membership of the Conference on College Composition and Communication Conference in April 1974, and the resolution, along with supporting background material, appeared as a special issue of *College Composition and Communication* in the fall of the same year (see www.ncte.org to access this material). The resolution challenged teachers to rethink how they use and respond to students’ language and advocated the teaching of edited American English within the context of other Englishes. For a discussion of this resolution and its history, see Smitherman 2003. See also the Linguistic Society of America’s 1996 “Statement on Language Rights” (lsadc.org/info/lssa-res-rights.cfm).
2. See, for example, Smitherman and Villanueva 2003, Redd and Webb 2005, and Nero 2006.
3. Because of the diversity of our linguistic and cultural heritage, we prefer to use “edited American English” instead of “standard English,” which perpetuates the myth of a universal American standard. As Bean et al. (2003: 37) report, “The rise of ‘world Englishes’ around the globe is causing diverse varieties of English to be widely used, published, and sanctioned, thereby creating contexts in which the idea of a ‘standard English’ is recurrently questioned and critiqued.”
4. Julie Hagemann (2001) provides a sociolinguistic explanation for an overt pedagogy that values the home language of nonmainstream students, but she places all emphasis on code-switching, making students aware of their own language and how it varies from edited American English. She argues that doing so makes students less defensive about their language and more open to learning the conventions of academic English. While this approach offers teachers a useful strategy, we would argue that it is equally important to create opportunities for students to use their own language in writing situations in which code-switching would be inappropriate and unnecessary.

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